

Alerter

The magazine of the Fire Brigades Union Retained Members www.fbu.org.uk

Spring 2007

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Transferring to wholetime: how's it being done?



Editorial



It has been a year since our historic pensions victory in the House of Lords. The issue returns to the Employment Tribunal in early March and the ET will now have to be guided by the judgement in the Lords. The claim also included sick pay, and supports the principal of equal treatment with wholetime firefighters. This year the FBU and National Retained Committee will work towards achieving a full settlement of the case - as well as identify and campaign on other areas of unequal treatment.

That includes the Integrated Personal Development System (IPDS), which was part of the June 2003 pay agreement. We have concerns that RDS members are being excluded and are not being given the same opportunities to progress at the same pace of our wholetime members. I now have a seat on an IPDS working group, which will identify any barriers to implementation, and report on practice within brigades.

We also understand that in some brigades our members are not in receipt of pay protection. This protection should be automatic – it does not have to be negotiated – as it is part of the June 2003 pay agreement. Pay protection ensures retained members are not any worse off for the same pattern and level of activity. This aspect of the pay agreement is particularly relevant to junior ranks and guarantees that everyone receives an increase in pay following the changes to the system of payments to RDS firefighters.

These and other issues highlighted in this Alerter were made known to the FBU's national retained officials as we visited regions and brigades in recent weeks and months to engage directly with members. We want to hear your concerns. Email us at alerter@fbu.org.uk or contact your regional rep – details listed on the back page.

Tam Mitchell, Executive Council Member, Retained

Les pompiers? We have much in common with France's RDS firefighters

EVER wondered what life is like for firefighters working the retained duty system outside the UK?

While on holiday last year, I happened upon Bagnols En Forets Station in the Department of the Var in the South of France to see for myself. What I found were great similarities as well as significant differences.

Var is France's number one tourist zone, comprising just over 6,000 square kilometres, 153 towns and villages, three cities and a population of 900,000 residents in the winter that swells to over 2 million in the summer.

Fire cover is provided by 3,600

'volunteer' firefighters and 840 full-time firefighters.

Although they are known as volunteers, the duty system they operate is broadly similar to the retained duty system (RDS) here in the UK. Each year they attend over 76,000 callouts.

Like us, they are paid by the calls they receive and provide cover in much the same way as RDS firefighters in the UK.

They used to carry alerters similar to those carried by UK FRS personnel, although now they are mobilised by mobile phone.

The station attends an average of 450 calls per year. But whereas we should be relieved after a period of four hours, they can remain at a fireground for up to three days!

Many of them also work for the local council. During the winter, the establishment level is 15, but for a three-month period during the summer this rises to 35. This is achieved by bringing in retained firefighters from other quieter stations throughout the whole

You and the FBU

ERIC GALLARD / REUTERS/CONRIS



country, not just the region.

The station's resources include one water ladder, three all-terrain vehicles for forestry fires, one water carrier, one first response vehicle and two motorbikes.

Some of the equipment that is supplied on the all-terrain vehicles used for forestry is quite unlike that carried by UK fire and rescue services.

Bagnols En Forets Station, situated about 20 kilometres from the coast, was one of the front-line stations at the large forest fires in 2004. During major incidents such as these, firefighters risk being caught in the line of a fast-moving forest fire.

Crews are issued with individual silver canopies and 15-minute duration emergency BA hoods. These are designed to provide a last resort refuge to protect firefighters for up to 15 minutes to allow a rapidly advancing fire to pass over them.

In this area, forest fires can move at speeds in excess of 100 kilometres per hour when affected by the mistral winds and they can devastate vast

areas of the established pine and oak forestry.

For the Bagnols En Forets firefighters, fire calls are paid by the hour at eight euros per hour (£5.30) for daytime calls. Night time calls attract an additional two euros per hour. Calls that occur over the weekend are paid at an enhanced rate of 150%.

Drill nights are held and attended once per week in the winter but during the summer, due to the larger influx of personnel, drills can be held several times per week to allow for all personnel to be trained.

In a fire service with a rank structure that is much more militaristic than the UK's, ranging from Sapeur (firefighter) to Colonel (CFO), recruitment starts at 18 years and the (mandatory) retirement age is 55.

Ray Price, firefighter at Stourport on Severn, Hereford & Worcester, and National Retained Committee rep, Region 7

A sapeur pompier battles a forest fire in southern France



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Every chance we got we pushed our case to save Headland station, says Cleveland firefighter and NRC member Mick Jones

Cover picture Simon Green

Published by the Fire Brigades Union, Bradley House, 68 Coombe Road, Kingston upon Thames, KT2 7AE . Tel: 020 8541 1765, fax: 020 8546 5187

Design by Edition Periodicals, 241-251 Ferndale Road, London SW9 8BJ. www.editionperiodicals.co.uk

Printed by Lookers, 24 Factory Road, Upton, Poole, Dorset BH16 5SL.

CAMPAIGN NEWS

In short

◆ The National Retained Committee has welcomed the **election of Grant Mayos** to the role of Regional Secretary Elect for Region 8, Wales. He has served as the NRC representative for the Welsh region for most of the past two years. This is the first time that such a position has been held by a serving RDS member within the FBU and demonstrates that accusations by other so-called representative groups that the FBU is a union solely concerned with the issues of wholetime members are completely unfounded.

◆ As Alerter went press, it learned **Warwickshire** fire and rescue authority is proposing to close five RDS stations – Bidford-on-Avon, Studley, Bedworth, Kenilworth, Warwick – in a move that would herald one the biggest cuts to the retained service ever. The proposals do not form part of the authority's integrated risk management plan. Mike Franklin RDS crew manager at Bidford and station FBU rep, has written to councillors asking them to reject the proposals: "Warwickshire County Council gets an extremely good service for its money from Bidford firefighters," he said.

◆ RDS firefighters in Avon and Gloucestershire FRS will become some of the first in the country to receive support from a dedicated project worker on a full time basis for **IT and Skills for life (SFL) courses** run in partnership with local colleges, with Keynsham, Paulton, Cirencester and Cinderford stations likely head of the queue. The FBU were successful in submitting a £64,800 bid to Learning Works for All (LWfA), a partnership managed by South West TUC. The bid followed a successful pilot project run last year for RDS firefighters working at Bath Fire Station. Bath Crew Manager Dave Cowley, who was among one of the nine who took part, said: "At the station we are using computers more and more and now we are able to use programs that we were not able to use before - it has opened a whole new world. It has definitely made the job easier."



FBU retained reps together with President Ruth Winters (centre) at the Union's retained annual general meeting 19 November last year at Wortley Hall. Resolutions were passed on redeployment of RDS staff threatened with redundancy, trade union facilities for RDS reps and retained recruitment in the fire service

Cumbria members say No

SALARY SCHEME

Cumbria FBU members working the retained duty system have rejected a salary scheme proposed in August last year as part of the fire authority's IRMP.

When the scheme was first proposed the Union said that "anything that was beneficial to the retention and recruitment of retained duty system personnel would be welcome". Management were reported in the local press as saying that, with this scheme, only 4 per cent of Cumbria firefighters would be worse off.

But when the detail of this proposed scheme was later made available, it looked very similar to one currently in use in Lancashire that is highly unpopular with retained firefighters there. Further coverage and debate in the Cumbria media suggested the proposed change would in fact cost some firefighters thousands of pounds a year.

The Union distributed details of the scheme across the county's stations. In November, at a meeting with management, the FBU, including RDS reps, told management that any acceptance of the salary scheme would have to follow full consultation with RDS members in the county.

Meetings were held for FBU Members at Whitehaven (with Retained EC member Tam

Mitchell and NRC Secretary Pete Preston attending) and Penrith (with Region 5 retained rep Miles Parkinson attending). Twenty four out of a possible 36 stations were represented. RDS members made it clear they were wholeheartedly against the proposed salary scheme because the money on the table was woefully inadequate and it was also totally inflexible.

Nobody was happy

One of the ideas in the document was to pay stations in accordance with how many turnouts they had in a 12-month period: the more turnouts the more pay. But there were firefighters at the meetings from stations that had the most turnouts and the fewest – and none were happy with the payment they would receive.

"The Union did not realise that feelings were so high about this issue," said James Benson, an RDS firefighter at Whitehaven and FBU retained rep. The scheme was obviously not as beneficial as management had first stated. Since these meetings, management have said that the proposed salary scheme in Cumbria has been postponed, but will be looked at later in the year. We hope for everybody's sake that we, the retained FBU members in Cumbria, are in on any discussions to ensure that any changes will be to our benefit."

Reps learn about learning

FBU ULF

FBU reps for retained duty system firefighters across the UK visited the headquarters of the FBU Union Learning Fund in Morpeth, Northumberland, in January.

The aim was to enable the National Retained Committee (NRC) to gain a deeper insight into how working in partnership with the Union Learning Fund benefits retained duty system members while also strengthening the links between branch members and officials throughout the UK.

The visit was arranged by Stuart Owen – retained ULF coordinator for Hereford and Worcester, who has also been working closely with the ULF national centre in developing strategies for delivering the ULF's objective to RDS firefighters – and Adrian Slassor, one of the ULF national coordinators.

During a tour of the facilities on offer in Morpeth, the NRC reps were

shown the classrooms and given a taster of some of the many online lessons and tests that are available. Many of the facilities are not just restricted to students attending the centre in Morpeth but provide online resources.

This is to allow as many members – and especially RDS firefighters who would often not be able to take part in regular scheduled lessons due to the requirements of being on call – as possible to benefit from what is available with a minimum impact on their everyday commitments and responsibilities, Adrian explained in a presentation to reps.

The Morpeth centre also has mobile facilities allowing it to take the classrooms offsite. “This has proved invaluable as it has allowed the centre to come direct to many of the retained stations across Northumberland brigade. This has been very well received,” said Adrian.

→ For more info visit:
<http://ulf.fbu.org.uk/>



FBU members taking part in Learning at Work Week, an initiative support by the FBU Union Learning Fund



NOEL JORDAN

Northern Ireland (Region 2)

Retained station cuts

Northern Ireland's fire authority has proposed sweeping cuts to the retained service. The plan is for a 50% cut in cover affecting 12 two-pump stations located in 12 medium-sized towns across Northern Ireland: Ballycastle, Ballyclare, Ballymoney, Castlederg, Clogher, Holywood, Kilkeel, Lisnaskea, Maghera, Newtownhamilton, Portstewart and Rathfriland.

The draft IRMP 2007/08 was published on 1 November, just as FBU regions 1 (Scotland) and 2 were holding an “engaging with politics” seminar in Belfast where FBU reps interacted with local and national politicians in a “question time” style debate at the home of the Northern Ireland Assembly in Stormont.

This event proved to be the perfect stepping off point for FBU officials to embark on a high intensity campaign aimed at raising political and community awareness of the implications of the proposals. By 12 December, FBU reps had blitzed the media and met with and briefed all the major political players in the Northern Ireland Assembly, as well as local councillors and members of parliament.

Then followed a cross-community motion to the Northern Ireland Shadow Assembly where 23 MLAs spoke in opposition to the IRMP and carried the motion unanimously! It is not often in NI politics that all parties find something to agree on – that they did over these cuts indicates the strength of feeling on the issue.

The consultation closed on 31 January. Even before this the FBU detected a change in NI Fire and Rescue Service's language. It now appears that the Union had over-reacted in an alarmist manner and that the draft IRMP was nothing more than a consultation about a consultation. But current indications are that the NIFRS is unlikely to reconsider its proposals. Region 2 members are preparing for a long game.

Briefing

A firefighter is

A firefighter is a firefighter, is a firefighter. That's a phrase you'll often hear when discussion turns to the different duty systems in the fire service. Since the pay dispute this maxim has had a greater ring of authenticity than ever. Yet given the progress that has been made by retained firefighters – backed by the FBU – in establishing their rights to parity with the wholetime service, why is transferability from retained to wholetime still such a haphazard process?

If you ring round the country's brigades you will find an unprecedented and heartfelt desire to make it easier for retained firefighters to make the transition to wholetime. But ask: "How is it being done?" and you'll get as many different answers as there are brigades.

Peter Preston, FBU National Retained Committee Secretary, says every brigade is pursuing its own ad hoc system: "There is no national procedure to go from being retained to wholetime. Historically, when the retained transfer to be wholetime they had to start the recruitment system from scratch and apply as if they'd never been in the service before.

"There were no allowances for the training they'd already had – breathing and even driving training had to be done again. It still happens in most brigades. It's farcical and a total waste of money."

If you are a conspiracy theorist, the fact that the fire service historically has not made it easy for retained firefighters to become wholetime would be a no-brainer. There's a chronic shortage of retained firefighters – 18,500 jobs, with only 13,000 being filled. Yet as soon as a wholetime job is advertised, stand back and watch the stampede. As Peter Preston says: "I recall one particular recruitment campaign in

Why is transferability from retained to wholetime still such a haphazard process?

my own brigade in North Wales where they had advertised for 11 jobs and there were over 1,100 applicants.

"People from all walks of life want to be wholetime firefighters. Yet brigades have a massive problem finding people to give retained daytime cover."

However the desire – if not the system – to make transfers easier, seems to be there. Norfolk fire service, for example, appears to

Every brigade is pursuing its own ad hoc system. It's high time for a national procedure

be ahead of the game and seems to have it all mapped out.

But there's a catch. Neil Day, FBU Brigade Secretary in Norfolk, says the union and the brigade spent three months defining a clear and proper transfer procedure.

"We ran a few test cases and concluded that there were only a few elements missing from the skills already acquired by the retained. We figured it would only take ten days training, as opposed to the 11-16 weeks wholetime course. We recognised there was a degree of difference between the wholetime and the retained, but not much."

And the catch? "Unfortunately, Norfolk brigade doesn't have the resources to implement it. They need to find and pay qualified instructors to teach the course. So, anyone

making the transfer in our brigade still has to do the full 16-week wholetime course.

"We even had a case where five retained firefighters were promised this new modular course but there was so much procrastination, with nothing in the end happening, that it would have been quicker if they'd just done the 16-week course!"

Peter Preston applauds the new mindset, if not the execution. "We see this as a very positive step. I've seen a significant number come off retained watches to become wholetime, with some of these guys getting credit for their retained training, thus reducing their wholetime training. However, the fire service still made them go through the initial selection process, as if they'd walked in off the street, and we're not happy with that at all."

We know there's an invisible barrier within the fire service between retained and wholetime and we aim to break it down

Peter gets to the heart of what is required: "If vacancies occur in the brigade it should be simple and straightforward and retained firefighters should get full allowance for their skills. We want training modularised, so it's broken down into component parts, bite-size chunks. The union – and retained firefighters – want the service to have a fully recognised national system.

"The retained are fed up with being treated as second class citizens. They want access to the same promotion prospects. It's a bizarre anomaly of the fire service. Other organisations allow internal applications."

Peter points out some fire services are more progressive than others. "Leicester are very proactive in taking internal applicants. If a wholetime job comes up, anyone in the organisation can apply. Control staff and everyone."

So what of the experiences of those who have successfully negotiated the transfer? Lee Howl made the transfer from retained firefighter to wholetime with West Midlands fire service. The service decided he would follow the procedure as if he was a wholetime firefighter coming in from another brigade. So they interviewed him accordingly – and failed him.

Three weeks later, they called back and said



Mark Jones, also pictured above with colleagues at Windsor fire station in Berkshire, says he "had to apply as if I was a member of the public" but "my retained skills got me the job"

a firefighter ...



on reflection they thought they'd been a bit tough on him, considering he was retained, and so awarded him the transfer.

"I was really pleased to get the job," he says. "However, I still had to do the full 16-week training course, even though I'd been a retained firefighter for four years. I have to

I had to apply as if I was a member of the public and go through all the usual assessment days, interviews and aptitude tests

say, I thought it was a waste of the fire service's money. Yet West Midlands encourage transfers. There were nine last year and two more coming in February 2007," says Lee.

In the case of Royal Berkshire's Mark Jones, localised and unsystematic recruitment procedures probably worked to his advantage. As a retained watch manager at Pangbourne station, but also a wholetime firefighter at Tilehurst, Mark decided he was going to use

his retained watch manager experience to apply for the same rank in wholetime. "In lots of ways it was an unusual step, as I got the job, and managed to jump a rank in the wholetime structure – going from firefighter to watch manager. In this instance, my retained skills got me the job."

Yet when he originally made the transfer from retained to wholetime, Mark had to go the same route as a new applicant to the service. "I had to apply as if I was a member of the public and go through all the usual assessment days, interviews and aptitude tests. Obviously I had a distinct advantage over the other applicants."

Tam Mitchell, FBU Executive Council member for retained firefighters, a retained firefighter for 19 years and a crew manager at Carlisle station in Strathclyde, acknowledges that there is, in some circumstances, a skills gap between the retained and the wholetime.

But he says it is often station-specific – differing risk profiles and appliances – and does not require a full initial 13- or 16-week training course and it certainly shouldn't be a barrier.

"We need a national procedure where the level of competency can be determined and measured," he says. "There are only integrated personal development systems in 25 per cent of brigades. This would give credence to the view that the retained satisfy the criteria for competence."

The retained are fed up with being treated as second class citizens. They want access to the same promotion prospects

"Brigades handle transfers in their own unique ways. Some have a methodology but the majority have no procedure. We know there's an invisible barrier within the fire service between retained and wholetime and we aim to break it down."

"Retained firefighters are not given enough credit for their skills. When you get to an incident, you're all firefighters. There's no such thing as a retained house fire."



Headland crew: Back row (l to r) Mark Copeman, Jeff Moon, Chris Andrews, Peter Hart, Mick Jones, Mark Clayton. Front row (l to r) Ozay Yildirim, Andrew Remmer

HEADLAND STATION

Had the fire authority axed Headland fire station, Hartlepool would have lost 50% of its fire cover

CLEVELAND fire authority's 2006/2007 IRMP, which was published at the end of 2005, didn't make very good reading. It proposed to remove one of our two hydraulic platforms, close a fire station between midnight and 12 noon, reduce ridership on all wholtime appliances to four and remove a pump from three-pump wholtime Hartlepool (Stranton).

In the authority's plan for the retained duty system, only one station out of six was affected. Headland station was to change its role from response to prevention – the appliance would only be turned out when there was life at risk (confirmed persons reported). The rest of the time would be spent working within

We never sat back and thought we had done enough. Every chance we got we pushed our case

the community fitting smoke alarms and so on. As Headland is part of Hartlepool, the town would have lost 50% of its fire cover. The next station is 15 miles away.

There was outcry from FBU members and the public. Management insisted that the station would not be closing, there would be no job losses and that operational capability would be maintained. But, in time, the management would probably have looked at the number of times the station had been mobilised and found justification for its closure. Many believed Headland was facing "staged closure".

As a retained station in a close

community, we received lots of support. Along with wholtime FBU officials, we worked with the Headland parish council, who organised a public demonstration outside the station which attracted lots of media attention. All the next day it was the topic of the phone-in on local BBC radio. The local newspapers covered it too, with the mayor, following meetings with the FBU, using his column to support us. Our MP also made his support public. Local business people, along with councillors from areas outside our immediate turnout area, were concerned about the proposals and the impact it would have on the town.

A petition soon gathered 2,000 names. We ended with a public meeting chaired by the parish council. It gave the public a chance to ask questions to the FBU as well as our brigade management. In our eyes, the campaign was a success.

We never sat back and thought we had done enough. Every chance we got we pushed our case. Eventually the fire authority took notice – not only of us, but of the people who were supporting us. After many meetings and much debate the Headland fire station was left to continue operating as it was before the proposals.

Unfortunately, that wasn't the case for the wholtime appliance at Hartlepool (Stranton). The third pump from that station was removed and the firefighters relocated. But the FBU was successful in securing the complete withdrawal of a number of detrimental proposals, and significant amendments to others.

Mick Jones
Firefighter at Headland station
North East (R3) retained rep

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